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THE STATUS OF FRESHMAN COMPOSITION.

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DELIBERATIONS BEGUN AT A CONVENTION IN 1966 AND REFINED AT THE 1967 "SCHOLAR'S SEMINAR" IN LOUISVILLE, BOTH SPONSORED BY THE CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION, RESULTED IN THIS PUBLISHED "STATEMENT" WHICH URGES RESEARCH AND STUDY OF THE "DEEPER ASPECTS OF COMPOSING." THE REPORT BRIEFLY PRESENTS SEVERAL ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION AND DISCUSSES SOME FUNDAMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE SHAPING OF AN EFFECTIVE COURSE. FIVE ESSENTIAL FEATURES IN THE PREPARATION OF A COLLEGE COMPOSITION TEACHER ARE ALSO DISCUSSED. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION," VOLUME 19, NUMBER 1, FEBRUARY 1968, PAGES 81-85. (BN)

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THE STATUS OF FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

This statement has been developed from the deliberations of the 1966 convention in Denver and refined at the 1967 "Scholar's Seminar" in Louisville, both sponsored by the Conference on College Composition and Communication, whose Executive Committee endorses its publication in CCC. Contributors to the statement include Jerome Archer, Arizona State University; Richard Braddock, University of Iowa; Wallace Douglas, Northwestern University; Walker Gibson, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Robert Gorrell, University of Nevada; Patrick Hogan, University of Houston; Harold Kelling, University of Colorado; Richard Lloyd-Jones, University of Iowa; and Bain Stewart, University of Tennessee.

The nature and the future of the freshman composition course are unclear. The very expression, "*the* freshman composition course," is misleading, for it covers many approaches, some good and some bad. One hears of this college or that reducing or even abandoning its freshman composition requirement, but one wonders who is abandoning what—or whom. This document aims to clarify the situation by sketching several alternative approaches and displaying some fundamental considerations for the shaping of an effective course. The document concludes with a review of the preparation an instructor needs in order to teach the fundamental considerations effectively.

A considerable portion of the four-year and two-year college freshmen in our country have home backgrounds in which little premium has been placed on a rich experience with language, little emphasis given to a precision with words. In some elementary and secondary school systems, students still do almost no writing; they merely fill out workbooks and take short-answer tests. In many schools and in some high school honors courses, students write frequently but have little or no organized program of instruction in composition. Numerous other schools teach a few formulas for writing paragraphs, focus instruction and practice heavily on achieving mechanical correctness and, with the mistaken notion that it will improve sentence structure, on reviewing the concepts of traditional grammar. Still other schools, however, have carefully designed courses of study which lead the students from simpler to more complex aspects of a range of types of writing for various kinds of readers and situations.

Obviously, colleges and universities need placement procedures and several different freshman courses when they admit students whose home and school backgrounds vary widely. On what basis placement can best be made necessarily varies according to the students and the desired end results of the freshman composition program. More study is needed of what is involved in various types of writing for different types of readers in different situations and of how various students learn to do these different things well. Until these considerations are better understood, detailed course models and accompanying placement procedures cannot be suggested. But surely more is involved in effective placement than merely a "general level of writing ability," which may not even exist.

Hypotheses on the teaching of composition abound, yet little is really known about processes of composing, and a comprehensive theory of modern rhetoric is still suffering the pangs of birth. Too many college instructors, their graduate study devoted almost entirely to literature, have made no advanced study of composition, display little more than average competence in their own writing, and see their professional advancement associated with literary or linguistic scholarship. It is no wonder that study and research in the deeper aspects of composing have not traditionally received the sustained attention of our best minds. Nor should it be surprising to find conflicting evidence on whether or not freshmen typically improve their writing as a result of their composition instruction.

Certain recent developments hold promise of clarification and improvement. The Head Start program offers a way to enrich the language backgrounds children bring to

school. NDEA institutes in English have exposed thousands of practicing teachers to advanced work in composition, more and more undergraduate English majors are taking advanced courses in composition as a part of their preparation for teaching, and graduate English departments have begun to add advanced courses in rhetoric and in the teaching of freshman composition. Stimulated in part by federal grants, research in written composition is investigating problems barely recognized before, and new tools of research are being devised in the process. In the light of these promising developments —many of them barely initiated—it seems precipitous to abandon freshman composition without careful consideration.

Alternative Approaches

When a college sees no desirable alternative, it may well drop the freshman requirement. That is, if it conceives of freshman composition merely as a means of insuring that its students achieve "minimal literacy" and if it carefully selects for admission only students who have already achieved that minimum level, there is no point in requiring a course which teaches what the students already know. For such an approach to be a responsible one, not an abdication, it should include several features:

1. Unless all the freshmen come from high schools—and transfer students from junior colleges—known to have well designed writing programs taught by effective teachers, the college needs to include among its selection procedures not merely objective testing but the screening of a writing sample from each student, conducted by a faculty committee familiar with the college standard and willing to apply it.[1]
2. To help students maintain the abilities they have developed in their previous schooling, the college should insure that several of the liberal education courses (not special composition courses) include some planned instruction in the kinds of problems faced by writers in those fields. This may be much more difficult to do in some institutions than it would be in a small, excellent liberal arts college with a highly literate and dedicated faculty, for some instructors in more typical institutions may act merely as proofreaders or do nothing at all, in either case overlooking the intellectual aspects of writing. For this reason, when a faculty does undertake such a program it should evaluate it after several years to determine whether or not its objectives are being achieved after the initial enthusiasm has worn off.
3. Because the writing done in liberal arts courses as described above will doubtless be academic in nature, the college should also offer an elective course or a variety of elective courses in writing which emphasizes perception and imagination more than criticism and argument.

If the composition requirement is maintained, what shape might it take?

One approach is to offer a "skills" course—emphasizing a review of grammar and the marking of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics in student papers. Faculties should realize, however, that after years of such experience in the elementary and secondary grades, students in college usually do not improve their composing with the same approach.[2] If the approach is not effective, it is understandable that some colleges make such courses as inexpensive and easy as possible, herding large numbers of students into lecture halls or televised classrooms and marching them through the pages of programmed textbooks dealing with old-fashioned grammar to the neglect of the intellectual aspects of the composing process. No brief can be held for the set of prescriptions familiar to the conventional offering—an offering repeating the least admirable practices of high school teaching. If a college does have such a course, the catalog and transcripts should label it for what it is—remedial, subcollege work.

Are there courses in composition that are

[1] For a more thorough discussion of testing in composition, see the terminal report of the Committee on Testing, *College Composition and Communication*, XVII (December, 1966), 269-272.

[2] For an evaluation of the "skills" course at the peak of its popularity, see Porter G. Perrin's "Maximum Essentials in Composition," *College English*, VIII (April, 1947), 352-359.

not simply remedial, do not repeat earlier training, and can take a respected place in the education of a college undergraduate? We believe there are. But we also believe that there are several varieties of such courses and that even these varieties may well vary in details from one campus to another. At the risk of being vague, we undertake here to suggest what some of the varieties are and what fundamental considerations underlie them all.

Fundamental Considerations

The essential feature of these courses is their insistence on regarding every act of composing as an act of choice among various approaches and means of expression. The purpose of the courses we here propose is simply this: to increase and refine the student's awareness of his available choices and to prepare him to anticipate the effects of such choices.

The subjects traditionally associated with composition courses—literature, language, rhetoric, and mass communication—pertain to a study of choices in two ways: (1) they may stimulate rhetorical invention or (2) they may contribute knowledge directly by clarifying methods of choice. That is, in the first way, a poem or story may excite or annoy the student enough to provide a topic, generalizations, arguments, support for his writing. In the second way, a poem or story may exemplify an approach to a matter like organization, adding to a student's stock of approaches and means of expression by illustrating one or more of them.

It is in these two ways—by stimulating writing and by contributing to a study of writing choices—that subjects like literature, language, rhetoric, and mass communication have a place in the composition course. If these subjects themselves become the focuses or organizing principles of the course, it loses its justification as a writing course, and a title like "composition course" becomes merely an inaccurate label.

If a course is described largely in terms of the literary selections it employs or is organized by literary types or chronology, it certainly does not seem to be a composition course. If it is a course in "composition and literature," it should also be organized according to the nature of composing, and this organization should be equally wedded to the organization of the literature employed as a means of teaching composition. If the student writing is merely analysis of literature without deliberate attention to available approaches or means of expression in composition, it is essentially a literature course. If literature is used as a springboard for writing—to afford students and instructor a common basis in experience for writing and discussion, it is essentially a composition course.

Similarly, the study of language may serve a composition course if it helps the student explore the ways in which language has changed in the past and the dialects and styles in which it occurs today, helps him by liberating him from the notion that language is a single, pure, unchanging thing—a notion which confines him rather than opening up for him the various means available for writing. Some instruction and practice in the manipulation of complex sentence elements may be useful in helping a student increase his control over a variety of sentence structures he has not been writing, but this aspect of a college-level composition course should never degenerate into a study of syntax with application in the rudiments of usage.

These same principles apply in composition courses with other subject matters. The distinction must be drawn between *learning about* the history of rhetoric or various rhetorical approaches (or memorizing figures of speech!) and *using* in the student's actual composing the insights gained from studying the rhetorical principles and practices of others. In a mass communication-oriented composition course, the student is led to increase his own writing power by applying in it what he learns from analyzing the forms and limitations of various types of communications for various large, dispersed, unseen audiences. He may well compare the styles of articles on the same subject in a learned journal and a popular magazine, for example, for an awareness (which he should apply in his own writing) of the approaches and means of expression which some find appropriate for different kinds of readers. But if the course emphasizes the history of mass communication or the application of certain given principles in the preparation of scripts or articles, it is an introductory course in mass communication

or a course in trade writing, not freshman composition.

In the courses we propose, then, the student is not so much analyzing style or learning about rhetoric; he is *doing* it, by being encouraged to speak for himself and his experience in more than one way. It is the student, his experience and his expressing of it, that provides the true material for these courses. This experience need not always be written down in the earliest stages. What is it like sitting in this room, here and now? How many different people can you make of yourself as you answer that question from different points of view, for different readers, in different styles, and in different acts of communicating? What effects can be anticipated of these alternate forms?

As the student increases his control of his language, he learns to extend his perceptions to other people's experiences and points of view, at first those close to him and then those more removed in time, space, and point of view. Consequently, the student is led to understand their experiences and values from books and other media and to seek a wider range of means for analyzing other people and their concerns, for clarifying his and their points of view, and for resolving the problems that come between them. But the emphasis always remains on the choices among the available approaches and means of expression in writing, and the test of success is ultimately the effect of the writing on its intended readers.

There is finally a matter of responsibility for what one writes and how he writes it. Just as a student cannot responsibly take a position on a controversial question unless he is familiar in detail with its background and various possible positions on it, a student can hardly choose responsibly among competing approaches and means of expression until he has actually developed some experience in using the alternatives. Another way of putting it is this: the student cannot choose responsibly among several selves unless he knows what those selves are.—It may be too much for the composition instructor to promise that a student may "find himself" through the expression of many selves. But the implication is strong that this training can be valuable beyond its application in writing for practical purposes.

Preparation for College Composition Instruction

Our unhesitating contention is that much of the disarray of the present situation in freshman composition is the inevitable result of the incompetent practitioner, the "instructor" who uses the course to pursue his own interests in narrowly conceived ways rather than to help his students increase and refine their own awareness of approaches and means of expression from which they may choose.

The composition instructor must be able to write in a variety of ways and be able to analyze various kinds of writing, for he must be able to recognize merit when he sees it and to perceive the problems of the student writer and help him solve those problems. Although an occasional instructor will develop his understanding and proficiency through his own study and writing, most should prepare for their profession by formal study. Since composition is a central concern of the field, certainly everyone entering college English teaching should have these five essential features in his preparation:

1. He must have had the experience of writing at a level beyond the freshman composition course, either by taking a course in advanced composition or by writing for formal publication or for the scrutiny of other critical audiences.
2. He must have developed an understanding of how English vocabulary, grammar, and style have changed through the years and how they vary at the present from place to place and from situation to situation. He should have a knowledge of the modern grammars but should not conclude that such knowledge should be directly transmitted to the students in his composition courses nor that this knowledge provides him with an easy tool for the improvement of much of his students' composition.
3. He must understand various theories of rhetoric, not so that he will have his students memorize the topics or lists of figures of speech but so that he may draw from rhetorical theory

in helping students improve their composing.

4. He must have read a wide variety of writing, have developed a sensibility to the ways in which a variety of forms and styles have been and are used with varying effects on different readers, and he must be able to select passages from his reading to help students improve their composing.
5. He should have preparation for the practical problems of his classroom teaching, including such matters as planning lessons, designing assignments, reading papers, evaluating textbooks, and discovering the resources available from professional organizations.